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SUBJECT: UNDP PRE-PRIMARY: WORKING FROM NINE TO FIVE

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In an attempt to generate interest in the fledgling liberal United New Democratic Party (UNDP) and to reduce the number of candidates, the successor to the Uri Party conducted a pre-primary to pare down the number of candidates from nine to five over September 3-5. The five winners are: former Gyeonggi Governor Sohn Hak-kyu, former PMs Han Myeong-sook and Lee Hae-chan, former Unification Minister Chung Dong-young (DY), and former Health and Welfare Minister Rhyu Si-min. The contest was based on phone polling of the general public (50 percent) and members of the party's Electoral College (50 percent). The UNDP must still finalize rules for the primary, set to take place September 15-October 14, and still has a long way to go to gain support for a single candidate who could compete with the frontrunner, GNP's Lee Myung-bak on December 19. END SUMMARY

WORKING FROM NINE TO FIVE

¶2. (U) The one-month-old party, almost entirely made up of former Uri Party followers, on September 3-5 conducted "cut-off" polls of the general public and members of the Electoral College to narrow the field of candidates from nine to five. Pollsters in the first survey screened potential respondents to make sure that they did not support the GNP, and then asked whom of the nine candidates they supported, until they reached their goal of 2,400 respondents. The second poll was of 10,000 UNDP party members -- 7,000 who joined the UNDP as well as 3,000 former Uri Party members who inherited membership in the new party.

¶3. (C) Only 4,174 of the 10,000 registered delegates were found to be valid as announced by the vice chair of the party's primary committee but there will likely be no protest since none of the eliminated candidates have a strong following. The five remaining candidates received the following support: Sohn Hak-kyu (24.75 percent), Chung Dong-young (24.46 percent), Lee Hae-chan (14.37 percent), Rhyu Si-min (10.14 percent), and Han Myeong-sook (9.42 percent). Of the losers, former Uri Party Chairman Shin Ki-nam reportedly will support Lee Hae-chan and former Justice Minister Chun Jung-bae will support former Yuhan-Kimberly CEO and independent candidate Moon Kuk-hyun. The victorious five will stage a nationwide primary from September 15 through October 14.

14. (C) As the prospective GNP candidates did before the GNP finalized its primary (held August 19-20) rules, UNDP candidates are also pushing for advantages in the primary and have yet to settle their differences. The candidates have agreed to a consecutive, touring primary format that starts in Jeju, works its way to Seoul, and allows anyone to vote as long as they meet the September 10 registration deadline and promise not to support another party. The group will tour 16 cities nationwide and there will be a series of weekend votes.

15. (C) The major point of controversy is over whether to allow polling to supplement the voting as was the case in the GNP primary. Sohn has consistently led the other progressive candidates in public polls and wants to include them in the primary. Lee Hae-chan reportedly supports the idea as well. Chung Dong-young and Rhyu Si-min are against polls, because they have lower popularity and greater internal party support. Kim Sang-il, a long-time Chung Dong-young aide, explained to poloff that polling used in a primary, including the use of cellphones to cast votes, violated the democratic principle of ballot secrecy because the voter's choice could be traced back to them. Kim said that polling would be redundant: since the primary electorate could be as large as two million, the voting would already be open to everyone who wanted to take part. Although Kim said that Chung Dong-young was against the polling, he admitted that there was more flexibility in allowing voters to use cellphones in choosing their candidate. Preliminary rules show that mobile phone and internet voters must register September 17-October 6, and will be able to vote October 10 through 13. Rules for the primary will be finalized during the week of September 10.

ANTI-ROH: SOHN HAK-KYU AND CHUNG DONG-YOUNG

16. (C) Some pundits noted that Sohn Hak-kyu was losing momentum in part because of "mistakes" he has made in previous speeches and the consistent attacks by all other UNDP candidates. Sohn has been criticized for his August 3 call to "shake off the Gwangju incident" referring to a May 1980 incident during which pro-democracy protestors were killed, and for his August 16 statement about "being able to absorb GNP voters." Despite these faux pas, Sohn boasted double digit approval ratings for the first time in a "Joongang Ilbo" newspaper sponsored poll conducted on August 29 and still leads the other UNDP candidates by a wide margin in all polls. His Oxford education and pro-democratization activities in the 70s gives him an elitist, "true democrat" image, but is tempered by what is being called his "Achilles heel" -- his fifteen-year-long affiliation with the conservative GNP.

17. (C) Chung Dong-young Advisor Kim Sang-il told poloff that the source of Chung Dong-young's popularity within the party was that he was viewed as a traditional political leader. Despite his strengths, the same advisor reported Chung Dong-young's guarded optimism about his prospects for becoming president. Some pundits note that Chung Dong-young has a clean image and his poor childhood and background as an MBC TV anchor make him a popular choice for many. However, many also note that Chung Dong-young served in the Roh Administration, but ended up as an arch-enemy of the Blue House. They also argue that his home Honam Province works to his disadvantage on the national stage. Chung has been written off before, but the strong party support in the pre-primary attests to his well-organized support network.

PRO-ROH CANDIDATES: LEE, RHYU AND HAN

18. (C) Pro-Roh candidates Lee Hae-chan, Rhyu Si-min, and Han

Myeong-sook all trailed Sohn and Chung Dong-young in the pre-primary by double digit margins. Probably not coincidentally, they are also closer to the widely unpopular president. Lee and Han are former prime ministers while Rhyu is a former health minister. Blue House aides and officials are confident that Lee Hae-chan will emerge as the UNDP candidate and many expect him to absorb Rhyu and Han's support base as the primary progresses. His stand-offish manner and past golf-related mistakes seem to indicate he will have a hard time gaining the candidacy, but if the few die-hard Roh supporters that remain unite, he could be difficult for Chung Dong-young and Sohn to beat.

PREISIDENTIAL SUPPORT

¶9. (C) Former President Kim Dae-jung (DJ) remains an influential elder statesman who has yet to publicly endorse any of the progressive candidates. His close aides told poloff that DJ would fully support any candidate who emerged.

President Roh has expressed displeasure with Chung Dong-young and Sohn, but has conceded that he would support the anti-GNP candidate, whoever that might be. One Blue House contact told poloff that Roh would support Sohn if he publicly apologized for his actions as a GNP politician and speculated that Sohn might do that if he thought Roh's endorsement was necessary. Kim Hyun, a former Blue House official and now key advisor for Lee Hae-chan, told poloff that she was confident that DJ and Roh would support Lee because his policies were the closest to theirs.

SUMMIT LIABILITY

¶10. (C) Pundits are divided on whether the planned October 2-4 North-South summit will help the eventual UNDP candidate. Positive effects could include the solidification of a core of "peace" supporters, reinforcement of the merits of engagement with the North and justification of ten years of DJ-Roh North Korea policies. Those could be offset however, by the public's perception that Roh was guilty of blatant "summit electioneering." In case of a "photo-op summit," the public could be left with unfulfilled expectations which could work against the progressives. Some GNP officials have told poloff that the summit could cost Lee the election, but most expect the summit will have minimal effect on the outcome in December.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) The UNDP primary will likely be a down-to-the-wire affair as the candidates are desperate to try anything to not only win the candidacy, but gain some ground on Lee Myung-bak, the GNP candidate. Currently, Lee enjoys a large double-digit lead over all other contenders. Two of the pro-Roh candidates may decide to back the third and this could make the possibility of a pro-Roh UNDP candidate victory somewhat higher. A close primary in the UNDP could also draw more interest from the public, but currently the one-month old party enjoys very anemic, single-digit support. Clearly, all UNDP candidates face a long uphill struggle in their quest for the Blue House.

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